BLESSED RAGE FOR GOD

April 12, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Matthew 21:1-14

"And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought..." --Matthew 21:12 (RSV)

There are times when religion ought to get under our skin a bit, occasions when faith ought to do more than provide assurance, comfort and solace. Palm Sunday is one of them. In the Fourth Gospel account of the event there is a haunting line...: his opponents are observing the virtual riot he has incited by coming to Jerusalem on the first day of Passover week, and are lamenting that because of his enormous popularity they seem to have no way to get rid of him, which is what they are planning to do at the first opportunity, and as the parade passes by with the shouting people and the children, in a kind of pregnant futility they say - "Look, the world is going after him."

That's a hauntingly beautiful line. And indeed, for twenty centuries the world has gone after him, or at least has never ceased being intrigued by him and compelled by him, and has never succeeded in ignoring him for very long. But "the world" is also defined by the fact that the Palm Sunday parade didn't last very long, that the crowd which welcomed him with such exhilaration, tearing branches off trees and coats off backs, shouting "Hosanna" was, in rather short order, shoved aside and replaced by another crowd which observed his public humiliation and participated in it by screaming for his crucifixion. The world is partially defined by the possibility that at least some in those two crowds - the crowd that we know, the crowd that clamored for execution - were the same people. That's the world we live in: ambiguous, fickle. The parade doesn't last. Palm Sunday is the first day of the week in which Jesus Christ was put to death. Holy Week is Holy, in church tradition, not because of today's temporary triumph, but because of that awful triumph of love which happened on Friday.

Why did he do it? Why, in the face of all the good advice to remain in Galilee, why, in the face of powerful opposition to him, the high-level decision to eliminate him at the first opportunity - why did he insist on coming to Jerusalem? The answer is that he knew something no one else knew. The premise on which he lived - and the truth that he taught - is that life is lived best when it is given to high and noble purposes: that life is to be given extravagantly, that prudent caution can limit life in the name of protecting and preserving it. He said plainly - "it is more blessed - (which means happier) to give than to receive." He said plainly "the person who loses life for my sake will find it." And so, even though it contradicts our wisdom, going to the city was a consistent playing out

of those great motifs he had been expressing all along. The man knew something no one else knew.

I think he knew that his life was rapidly approaching its supreme crisis. I have never been able to believe he was simply playing out the divine script. His humanity, like ours, filled him with anxiety, fear, and hope for a peaceful and long life. I believe he made decisions that day - which were fateful, but which were utterly free and utterly human. I think he came to Jerusalem because he knew it was his vocation: it was the consistent expression of his own sense of himself, and to decide not to come, to opt for the relative safety and serenity of Galilee would have been a denial of who he was. There is a day, I believe, when who we are is simply declared to us - given to us by God... It is the day when the mountain must be climbed, the race run, the campaign conducted, the decision made, the battle fought, when not to act, to hesitate, is to deny our very being.

He knew he was a wanted man. The Sanhedrin had decided several months before to have him arrested whenever the opportunity presented itself. He knew that wherever he went people were beginning to call him Messiah and King. He knew that he could die for that. He knew that those titles sounded like treason and blasphemy to powerful people in the capital city; that it's one thing to be called the Christ in the gentle hills around the Sea of Galilee and it is another thing altogether to be called the Christ within earshot of the High Priest in the busy precincts of the Temple. Like it or not what sells in Peoria often doesn't make it in Manhattan or Chicago.

And he knew how explosive the atmosphere was every Passover, when hundreds of thousands of pilgrims crowded into Jerusalem to celebrate the nation's liberation from Egyptian slavery centuries before. He knew that patriotic fervor ran high and that Passover made the Romans very nervous. It's no wonder the disciples and the small entourage of friends followed along behind, caught up in a combination of admiration for his courage and at the same time terror at the probable outcome and their own involvement in it.

They stopped for the night at Bethany, the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The next morning, the first day of Passover week, he began to act very deliberately. Having come all the way from Jericho on foot, he requested a donkey for the last few miles. So, he rode into Jerusalem, and the Galileans who knew him or about him, the country folk on holiday in the big city, were there to greet him. What they saw must have taken their breath away. One of their favorite passages of Scripture was the messianic prophecy in the Book of the Prophet Zechariah - "Lo, your king comes to you: triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass."...

They erupted. Literally. Having come to the city to celebrate Passover they were caught up in the possibility that the rumors about him were true. He was the Messiah. He was saying as much. He was claiming it. They were about to witness something their forebears had waited for, prayed for, longed for, for generation after generation. And so they tore branches from the trees and the clothes off their backs to lay in his path.

As he headed for the Temple the intensity would have increased. The authorities were getting more nervous; the people more frenzied. What happened next did nothing to dissuade them. The outer court of the Temple was public space: Gentiles were welcome there. But in 30 A.D., the High Priest, Ciaphas, in a dispute with the authorities, had allowed merchants and money changers to set up shop there. Gifts, tithes and temple taxes had to be paid in Jewish coinage. So tables were arranged for exchanging Roman money for appropriate coins - for a fee. In addition, the law required that only animals without blemish could be offered as a sacrifice. Pre-inspected animals were available for pilgrims. And so the Outer Court, where Gentiles were welcome for worship and prayer had become a noisy, raucous, smelly, and immensely profitable bazaar.

With his band of friends and the noisy demonstrators behind him, Jesus took one look and overturned the tables of the money changers and drove off the salesmen and their livestock. It must have been quite a scene. It, too, was reminiscent of a precious Messianic prophecy everyone on the premises knew by heart -

> "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple...but who can endure the day of his coming?" the prophet Malachi had asked... "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap."

That was it: the moment to which all the deep hopes of generations had been pointing. All he had to do was say the word and the Temple would have been theirs and the Kingdom would come... Instead, he sat down and, of all things, blind people, sick people, crippled people came to him and he healed them. After a while he got up and left and went back to Bethany for the night. The crowd was gone. The King they welcomed turned out not to be the King they wanted. The scene was set for spurned love to become hatred, for the nervous authorities to make their move. The day which had begun with such high promise had made the crucifixion inevitable.

There is about Jesus on this day a high and holy intentionality. There is a sense today that he truly was in control: that the only one acting with absolute integrity is the strange Rabbi on the donkey. There is about him this day an intensity, which is both attractive and frightening, which flashed in anger and which, borrowing from a book title by Chicago theologian David Tracy, I have come to know as a Blessed Rage for God. I have come to believe that to participate in that, to stand back a bit as those frightened disciples did: to know the awesome rage of this utterly intentional man on his way to his death - is agenda enough for this day.

First of all there is the flash of anger...which contradicts, sometimes, favorite images of Jesus... Anger puts us off, doesn't it? Polite, refined culture, at least of the WASPish genre, doesn't know what to do with anger, is made uncomfortable by anger. Some of us learned over the years that anger itself is not appropriate, that we ought not to be angry, that good people, nice people, don't get angry. And it has taken some of us a lot of years to discover that we were created with the wonderful capacity for a range of emotions, from joy to grief, from love to hatred, from affection and lust to anger. It has taken some of us years to

learn - with a solid assist from the psychologists, that while we are responsible for our behavior, we are not responsible for having feelings: that you don't have to punch or insult everyone with whom you are angry, but you do yourself no favor and probably a lot of harm by denying that you are angry.

Jesus' blessed rage at what was transpiring in the Temple courts ought at least to allow for the productive use of occasional anger, even outrage. Those men who gathered in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 and declared our Independence, turned out to be, upon historical inquiry, controlled and focused, but nevertheless thoroughly angry young men. Sometimes we ought to get angry. It might be good for us and for the whole system. Sometimes there are injustices so profound that the only way ever to cope with them creatively is to begin with the anger they stimulate. Two weeks ago I was at a shelter for the homeless for just a few minutes, and in the course of my stay a one-month old baby boy was plunked into my arms. His mother has had four babies, three of whom have been placed in foster homes. She is fighting to keep this one. But she has no home. Nothing about her past or present has prepared her for child raising or even for coping with the ordinary details of daily living. She doesn't even have an address. She is one of the thousands of people who doesn't come close to reaching the bottom of the sagging support system we must not ever call a safety net. Her son will die soon - if not of exposure and malnutrition and disease then surely he will die emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, which means that his actual death will be at the hands of a gang, or the police, or in prison. And so I have been dealing with anger - that this wonderful system which serves some of us so generously, can produce that - or allow that - or rationalize that - or disguise that. His blessed rage invites ours, I would propose.

The major motif, of course, is that he came to the city in the first place. For twenty centuries Christian people have tried to pretend that he didn't; that the focus of the Gospel narrative is in the countryside, the gentle hills of Galilee. For if it remains there, his Gospel can be confined to the serene contours of the heart and never have to confront the jagged edges, and blunt, harsh realities of the city. We have tried valiantly to maintain that what Christianity is about is the internal spirituality of the individual and that everything outside that private sphere is worldly, tainted, secular, inappropriate to be in relationship with Jesus.

In our time that emphasis has met, head-on, a cultural phenomenon called the "New Narcissism" - the protracted concentration on the self - self fulfillment, self actualization, which earned the nick-name, the "Me Generation" and which used to be called selfishness, and it was love at first sight. Now you can have it all: the assurance of your personal salvation and God's unconditional love for you without any spill over into the ambiguities of life. You can feel good about who you are without feeling bad about anything - without muddying the water with a lot of human ambiguous issues, political, social and economic issues. A young friend of mine, a very successful broker, whose integrity I admire and whose friendship I value, called me to say that he, a nominal Presbyterian, had been turned on spiritually, had "found the Lord" - was quitting Presbyterianism and joining a "booming" church because it was "spiritual"

and affirmed who he was and didn't ask him - his words, not mine - to change his lifestyle or values - and didn't ever make him "feel bad."

I wonder where he found that Lord? It wouldn't have been on Palm Sunday. Because he's busy - in the center of the city, turning tables over in the Temple and challenging the priests and politicians and the business community in an act of moral outrage, which concludes with him sitting down and dealing with the poor, sick, blind, and crippled - who the politicians and the religious authorities quite forgot.

The blessed rage of our Lord means that what happens in the city, in the intense focus of humanity which is what city means, is blessed and holy because it is so secular and so human. It means that the line between sacred and secular is not distinct. It means that when the elevators don't work at Cabrini-Green because we can't seem to generate the funds to keep them fixed, we are dealing with a matter about which Jesus Christ cares.

What made him so angry in the Temple courts, I think, was the profaning of God's name. That is the everlasting danger of public religion - that in the process of being so public, God's name is misused, misrepresented. That is the tragedy of the front page debacle television religion has experienced: when all is said and done, it is not moral lapses - but the theological misrepresentation.

Reinhold Niebuhr, writing for another generation but remarkably relevant at this moment in history proposed: "Secularism is, on the one hand the expression of our sinful self-sufficiency. It may be, on the other hand, a reaction to profanity. Some people are atheists because of a higher implicit theism than that professed by believers. They reject God because his name has been taken in vain, and they are unable to distinguish between his holiness and its profanization." [The Christian Church in a Secular Age, The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, R. W. Brown, p. 85]

Some of the secularism about which we are so concerned may reflect an integrity, a deeper sense of God's justice, God's grace, God's love, God's mercy - than what is proposed with consummate media and marketing skill by the televangelists.

Jesus came to the city with a holy intentionality and a blessed rage for God. He calls the Church to be there - to be his presence: to remind the city that there is a God: to open its arms to lonely, forgotten city people with an inclusive, unconditional acceptance and love. We are called to a ministry of presence here, at this secular intersection. And on this day we must remember that part of that presence is the brave intent to change the place, to be the instrument for its reconciliation, to be the advocate for its outcast and lost sheep, and to be about that presence with an occasional blessed rage for God.

It is a strong Christ who bids us to follow today: a Christ whose strength has always been compelling to me even as it has frightened me: a Christ I love and respectfully proclaim to you. He is a Christ who takes the world seriously enough, loves the world profoundly enough to get angry.

That strong Christ, I believe, will be even more personal and

intimate to you, if you allow him to be in the city and if you would dare follow him there: that is, if you simply erase the line between him and the rest of your life, the line you have drawn between spiritual and secular matters, the line between your faith and economics, politics, or social, familial, sexual or marital concerns. That strong Christ will minister to you, will be your Lord and Savior in powerful and creative new ways if you will open yourself to the transforming possibility that he has more in mind for you than your emotional enjoyment.

That strong Christ will be there for you and with you in the crises of your life which are probably not going to confine themselves to the department you have labeled "spiritual." That strong Christ will take your hand in his...

--as you face an unknown future
--as you make difficult decisions about your life
--as you feel within yourself anger at unfairness and injustice
--as you lie in a sleepless hospital bed at 4:00 a.m. waiting for surgery
--as you stand with influential people torn between your principles and expediency.

That strong Christ, capable of anger and profound love, faced the reality of death, and will take your hand in his and be your Lord and your savior when you walk that same road. He has been there ahead of you... he will be there with you and for... he bids you follow along behind... to join that blessed company which began that day and continues to this day - about whom it was said -

"Look,...the world has gone after him." Amen.

Praise to you Lord God - for strong and impatient love.

Praise to you, Lord God - for courageous love which became in Jesus Christ - a blessed rage for you and your Kingdom.

Praise to you - for the impulse in ourselves - to follow - to stumble along behind...to raise our voices and wave our branches.

Praise to you for Jesus Christ your son - our Saviour and our Lord.

Amen.